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# This Isn't Watergate—But the Moral Is the Same

By David Ignatius and Michael Getler

WE KNOW THE SCENARIO by heart: The president wins reelection in a landslide. As he begins his second term, the president seems invincible. Some overzealous aides, led by an autocratic chief of staff, plot strategems to deal with the president's perceived enemies at home and abroad. As the plans become more elaborate and dubious, the White House becomes obsessed with keeping them secret.

The secrets begin to leak out, as they inevitably do in a democracy, and the president's men try to cover them up. But the truth emerges anyway, in bits and pieces, in a way that is disastrous to the president's credibility. He fires a few aides who were most closely involved in the scandal. Then he fires his chief of staff. The gossip in Washington shifts to whether the president himself intends to resign.

The Iran affair isn't Watergate, of course. There isn't the same kind of clear criminality, and Ronald Reagan isn't Richard Nixon. But this past week, in the aftermath of the Tower Commission report, the two scandals seemed eerily alike. There was the same fascination and dread, the same sense of tawdry spectacle, the same sadness at watching a group of self-important White House aides put the rest of the nation through the wringer and turn a seemingly successful presidency from triumph to tragedy with astonishing speed.

And it could get worse. By the time the Iran affair runs its course many months from now, it may prove to be even more debilitating than Watergate. That's because there are so few people left in the administration who aren't tarnished in some way.

Watergate had its villains, to be sure, but it also had heroes. Elliot Richardson and William Ruckelshaus chose to resign rather than fire Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox. Henry Kissinger and James Schlesinger shielded national security policy from the tempest. And Gerald Ford was waiting in the wings to calm the nation after Nixon's resignation.

Who are the comparable heroes in the Reagan administration? Unfortunately, there are none. The Tower report notes that even though Secretary of State George Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger disagreed strongly with the Iran arms-for-hostages deal, "they simply distanced themselves from the policy," rather than resigning in protest.

Indeed, when an American cargo plane carrying Eugene Hasenfus was shot down in Nicaragua last October—an event that began to lift the curtain on the extent of secret foreign policy—figures such as Shultz and Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams fairly boasted that such private air forces were none of their business and need not be looked into because there was nothing illegal about them. In other words, a private foreign policy was fine.

Beyond Shultz and Weinberger, the administration is largely in ruins. Donald Regan, the chief of staff, is out. Michael Deaver, one of the president's closest advisers during the first term, is on the verge of indictment. William Casey, the CIA director, has resigned because of a brain tumor. Robert McFarlane, the former national security adviser, has tried to commit suicide. Edwin Meese, the attorney general, faces questions about whether he conducted a prompt and thorough investigation of the Iran affair. Of the president's senior advisers, only the Treasury Secretary, James Baker, seems untouched by the fallout. The arrival of former senator Howard Baker as the new chief of staff will help, but probably less than the White House hopes.

The tragedy for the Reagan administration is that no one remembered the lessons of Watergate that had been so painfully learned by the nation and another administration less than 15 years ago.

Watergate demonstrated that there are clear limits to executive authority, and in particular to the ability of a president to conduct covert operations on questionable national-security grounds. You can't act secretly for very long in a democracy, even if you're as energetic as Oliver North. You can't put tape over a door at the Watergate apartment complex in 1972 and expect that it won't be discovered.

Similarly, you can't create a private air force—with six planes, dozens of support people and a private air strip in Costa Rica—to drop weapons into a country that we are not at war with and expect that nobody will find out about it. And you can't sell millions of dollars of weapons in secret to an avowed enemy of the United States and expect to get away with it. Reversing the political laws of gravity in that way was beyond the powers even of Ronald Reagan.

The Tower Commission report opened a curtain on what can only be described as the fantasy world inhabited by some of the military men who served the president on the National Security Council staff: Marine Lt. Col. North, Vice Adm. John Poindexter, and McFarlane, a former Marine lieutenant colonel. It offered the nation a disturbing portrait of these men, plotting together in secret, seemingly oblivious to the values their own president had espoused, and to the laws and traditions of the nation they had pledged to serve.

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Thanks to the Tower report, we can all look over Oliver North's shoulder and read his self-dramatizing message traffic in the NSC computer system. We learn that North told extraordinary tales to the Iranians about how Reagan went off for a whole weekend and prayed in deciding whether to authorize North to say to Tehran: "We accept the Islamic Revolution of Iran as a fact." Another North story had Reagan saying he wanted an end to the Iran-Iraq war on terms acceptable to Iran and that it was the Iraqi president who was causing the problem. Reagan later told the Tower Commission such descriptions were "absolute fiction."

North emerges in these computer messages as both vain and a workaholic, a man so exhausted by his dedication to causes that he seemed to have no time left for thinking. He talks about his fatigue in so many of these messages that, when read together, they sound almost like a cry for help.

"Warm, but fatigued regards," is the way North signs off a Feb. 27, 1986 note to McFarlane. "Am going home—if I remember the way," writes North to McFarlane on April 7, 1986. "I am not complaining, and you know that I love the work, but we have to lift some of this onto the CIA so that I can get more than 2-3 hours of sleep at night," North writes to Poindexter on May 16, 1986. "What we most need is to get the CIA re-engaged in this effort so that it can be better managed than it now is by one slightly confused Marine LtCol . . . . At this point, I'm not sure who on our side knows what. Help," wrote North to Poindexter on June 10, 1986.

The cable traffic would be funny, if it weren't so sad. What it reveals most clearly is that North—who ironically used the name "Project Democracy" to describe his private (and perhaps illegal) network of airplanes, ships, money, cars, warehouses, communications equipment and a 6,500 foot runway—didn't really seem to have a good understanding about how democracy is practiced in the United States. More importantly, those above North didn't seem to understand it, either.

Oliver North is undoubtedly a smart and tireless officer, the kind you want on your side in a fight. What the Tower Commission shows is what can happen when such persons are without supervision by officials with a firm understanding of how this country must work. What both Watergate and the Iran-contra affair also demonstrated in the end, fortunately, is that questionable behavior that seeks to circumvent established American institutions is likely to get uncovered before even worse damage is done.

As with Watergate, the riddle at the center of the Iran scandal is what the president knew about the misdeeds of his subordinates. Most of the initial accounts of the Tower report portrayed President Reagan as an almost pathetic figure—aloof, inattentive, unable to remember dates and details, manipulated by his subordinates, a "remote and confused man," as one newspaper put it.

But the most significant truth embedded in the Tower report may be that the Iran affair was Ronald Reagan's policy. The Reagan administration decided to trade arms for hostages, despite strong opposition from the secretaries of state and defense, because the president wanted it that way. Each time his senior advisers thought they had squelched the policy, the president revived it. Indeed, the Tower report suggests that for Ronald Reagan, freeing the hostages became a personal goal—something that he favored so deeply and passionately that the views of his advisers became irrelevant.

The discussion of the president's role has focused almost entirely on whether he did or didn't orally approve the first delivery of U.S. weapons to Iran by Israel. "I don't remember—period," the president told the Tower Commission. Fair enough. But there is considerable evidence that Reagan approved—indeed, urged—subsequent shipments of arms to Iran because of his commitment to freeing the hostages.

The hostages were the sort of foreign-policy problem, involving individual Americans in danger abroad, that directly engaged Reagan. The Tower report, citing McFarlane, says "the President inquired almost daily about the welfare of the hostages." And the president is said to have asked Poindexter at each morning's intelligence briefing: "John, anything new on the hostages?"

As with Watergate, the nightmare of the Iran affair was that once the arms dealing started in August 1985, it developed its own momentum. As early as December 1985, North wrote to Poindexter: "We are . . . too far along with the Iranians to risk turning back now." Shultz and Weinberger strongly disagreed, but their arguments didn't seem to influence Reagan. Instead, North and Poindexter continued to push ahead on the advice of a cluster of Iranian, Israeli and Saudi Arabian intermediaries and arms merchants who seem more suitable as characters in a class-B movie.

Each time the Iran program seemed about to collapse of its own weight, the president helped rescue it. For example, a consensus seemed to have emerged among the president's top advisers at a meeting on Dec. 7, 1985 that the arms-for-hostages dealing should be stopped. When McFarlane delivered this message the next day in London to Manucher Ghorbanifar, the Iranian intermediary warned that if the weapons trading stopped, "one or more of the hostages would be executed."

President Reagan, egged on by North, apparently was moved by this threat. At a meeting on Dec. 10, according to a memo written by CIA Director Casey, "The President argued mildly for letting the operation go ahead . . . . He was afraid that terminating the ongoing discussions . . . could lead to early action against the hostages."

Reagan's optimism seems to have carried the day. He was "disappointed" at that December meeting that all the hostages weren't yet free, "but always looking for the bright side or the possibility that it could be salvaged," according to McFarlane. Regan recalled the president's concern that "we were going to spend another Christmas with hostages there, and he is looking powerless and inept as President because he's unable to do anything to get the hostages out."

The same Micawberesque spirit—a conviction that "something will turn up"—prevailed in January 1986 when Reagan decided, over protests from Shultz, to ship arms directly to Iran. Shultz told the Tower Commission: "I recall no specific decision being made in my presence, though I was well aware of the President's preferred course, and his strong desire to establish better relations with Iran and to save the hostages."

Because of growing doubts about Ghorbanifar, there was a new effort to kill the program in March 1986. But according to a statement by the CIA's chief of operations for the Near East, North "kept it alive because of the President's personal and emotional interest in getting the hostages out. . . ."

As in Watergate, the president seemed driven by political anxieties which, in retrospect, make little sense. The CIA's Near East director described the mood to the Tower Commission: ". . . the real thing that was driving this was that there was in early '86, late '85, a lot of pressure from the hostage families . . . and there were a lot of things being said about the U.S. Government isn't doing anything . . . . And there is a lot of fear about the yellow ribbons going back up."

There aren't any "smoking guns" in the Tower report about Reagan and the diversion of funds to the contras. But there is some evidence that he knew, at least in general, about North's private fund-raising efforts for the Nicaraguan counter-revolutionaries. In a May 16, 1986 memo to Poindexter, North said: "I have no idea what Don Regan does or does not know re my private U.S. operation but the President obviously knows why he has been meeting with several select people to thank them for their 'support for Democracy' in CentAM."

The most refreshing comment in the Tower report may be a remark from Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Armitage, who said he told North in November 1985, as the Iran fiasco was beginning: "I don't think my boss knows anything about this. I doubt that Secretary of State Shultz knows anything about [this]. I think your ass is way out on a limb and you best get all the elephants together to discuss the issue."

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